

Executive Summary

Heal the Bay's 16th Annual Beach Report CardSM provides essential water quality information to the millions of people who swim, surf, or dive in California coastal waters. Essential reading for ocean users, the report card grades over 350 locations year-round (486 locations in dry weather from April to October) on an A-F scale based on the risk of adverse health effects to beachgoers. The grades are based on daily and weekly fecal bacteria pollution levels in the surfzone. The program has evolved from an annual review of beaches in Santa Monica Bay to weekly updates of all monitored beaches throughout California. All this information is available in print and at www.healthebay.org.

The 2005-2006 Annual Beach Report Card shows that most beaches had very good water quality, with 301 of 356 (85%) locations receiving very good-to-excellent (A and B) grades for the year during dry weather. There were also 17 (5%) Cs, 9 (3%) Ds and 29 (8%) Fs. Southern California's (Santa Barbara through San Diego) grades were slightly lower than the statewide average (83% As and Bs). LA County had, by far, the state's lowest grades with only 68% As and Bs.

One of the reasons that Los Angeles County had the worst water quality grades in California was that the county was one of the first in the state to modify their monitoring program to collect samples directly in front of flowing storm drains and creeks. This change was a result of the Santa Monica Bay beach bacteria Total Maximum Daily Load requirements. Children play directly in front of stormdrains and some kids even play in the runoff filled ponds and lagoons. Monitoring at "point zero" is the most protective way to ensure the health risks to swimmers are minimized.

In addition to moving numerous beach monitoring sites to point zero, 14 new sites in the Santa Monica Bay were added to the monitoring program under the beach bacteria Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements. Unfortunately, the Los Angeles County Health Department failed to act on over a year's worth of this new beach monitoring data, failing to notify the public of beach pollution at any of the 14 new beaches. The health department never informed beach cities of the extent of their water quality problems, never posted the beaches, and never released media advisories warning the public of potential health risks. The health department also didn't investigate the cause of these high bacteria counts. The Los Angeles County Health Department is charged with protecting the public health of all beachgoers in the county, and has failed to adequately protect the health of millions of swimmers.

As in past years, there continues to be a great disparity between dry and wet weather water quality. Our last annual report reflected the most polluted wet weather season on record since the statewide beach monitoring program began in 1999. This was a result of the enormous amount of rain throughout the state during 2004-2005. This year's (April 2005 – March 2006) data continues

to show the stark difference between dry and wet weather quality, but wet weather grades are not nearly as dismal as the previous year's report card. This year, 46% of the 356 locations monitored during wet weather received fair-to-poor (C – F) grades. Southern California wet weather grades were slightly worse than the state average with 50% fair-to-poor grades.

Numerous California beaches vied for the "Beach Bummer" crown this year (the monitoring location with the poorest dry weather water quality). The five most polluted beaches in the state were all in LA County. The 10 worst were: Cabrillo Beach harborside at the lifeguard tower in Los Angeles County (10th), Topanga State Beach in Los Angeles County (9th), the Tijuana Rivermouth in San Diego County (8th), Doheny Beach in Orange County (7th), Pillar Point Harbor at Capistrano Avenue Beach in San Mateo County (6th), the Santa Monica Municipal Pier (5th), Surfrider Beach in Malibu (4th), Avalon Beach on Catalina Island (3rd), and Will Rogers State Beach at Chautauqua Blvd in Los Angeles County (2nd). Multiple locations in the north Santa Monica Bay share the dubious honor of being California's worst "Beach Bummer" this year. As part of the Santa Monica Bay Beaches Bacteria TMDL, data was collected for the first time this past year from the wave wash directly at the outlet of 14 different storm drains or creeks. Four of these new sites exhibited horrendous water quality, with one of the sites, Escondido Creek just east of Escondido State Beach, having the worst grades in the state for both the AB411 and year-round dry weather time periods (95% of samples exceeded state bacterial standards). The other three most problematic new north Santa Monica Bay monitoring locations were: Castlerock Storm Drain at Castle Rock Beach, Marie Canyon storm drain at Puerco Beach, and the Santa Ynez Storm Drain at Castle Rock Beach.

Every beach from Ventura County line south to Palos Verdes must meet state beach bacteria health standards 100% of the time by July 15th, 2006. It is clear that numerous beaches along Santa Monica Bay will not comply with the beach bacteria TMDL requirements for dry weather. The 100% compliance requirement is for the AB411 time period from April 1st to October 31st. That means that all beaches must be safe for swimming every day for the seven months from April to October. Many of the most polluted beaches in California are located along Santa Monica Bay. Clearly, more needs to be done to protect the health of the more than 50 million visitors to Santa Monica Bay beaches. Heal the Bay urges the Regional Water Quality Control Board to ensure compliance with the TMDL requirements as soon as possible after the July 15th deadline.

Heal the Bay completed an analysis of data from Santa Barbara County through San Diego County to determine if there were significant differences in water quality based on beach type. From our analysis, water quality at open ocean beaches during year-round dry weather was significantly better than water quality at those beaches impacted by storm drains or located within enclosed bays or harbors. 91% of open ocean beaches received an A grade for year-round dry weather compared to 71% at beaches impacted by a storm drain, and 79% at beaches found with-

in an enclosed bay, harbor or marina. The percentages during the summer dry weather time period (AB411), when most beachgoers were in the water, showed 89% of open ocean beaches with A grades, compared to 77% of beaches impacted by a storm drain, and 78% of beaches found within an enclosed bay, harbor or marina.

Heal the Bay has implemented a new grading methodology for the Annual Beach Report Card (BRC) this year. For the fourth time in the 16 year history of the program, Heal the Bay has modified the Beach Report Card grading methodology to better characterize local beach water quality. Amendments to the grading methodology include: the inclusion of the geometric mean into the calculation, a firm zero to 100 point scale, and greater weight for enterococcus and the total-to-fecal ratio relative to total coliform and fecal coliform. These modifications stem from comments made by California's State Water Resources Control Board and the Beach Water Quality Workgroup. With these improvements to the methodology, Heal the Bay's Beach Report Card grading system is now endorsed by the State Water Resources Control Board and the Beach Water Quality Workgroup as an effective way to communicate beach water quality to the public.

The Beach Report Card is based on the routine monitoring of beaches conducted by local health agencies and dischargers. Water samples are analyzed for bacteria that indicate pollution from numerous sources, including fecal waste. The better the grade a beach receives, the lower the risk of illness to ocean users. The report is not designed to measure the amount of trash or toxins found at beaches. The Beach Report Card would not be possible without the cooperation of all of the shoreline monitoring agencies in the state.

Heal the Bay believes the public has the right to know the water quality at their favorite beaches as soon as possible, and is proud to provide Californians this information in an easy-to-understand format. We hope that beachgoers will use this information to make the decisions necessary to protect their health.

County health officials and Heal the Bay recommend that beach users never swim within 100 yards of any flowing storm drain, or in any coastal water during a rainstorm, and for at least three days after a storm has ended. Storm drain runoff is the greatest source of pollution to local beaches, flowing untreated to the coast and often contaminated with motor oil, animal waste, pesticides, yard waste and trash. After a rain event, indicator bacteria densities usually far exceed state health criteria for recreational water use.

For more information, please visit www.healthebay.org, or call 1-800-HEAL BAY